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Look Before Leaping Into a Rut
Conserving Historic Trails

Heavily eroding Santa Fe Trail ruts. NPS photo.

A continuing challenge—and one of the greatest challenges facing the National Park Service since its inception in 1916—has been the mission of simultaneously having to conserve natural and cultural resources while providing for their appropriate use and enjoyment by the public. This has not been an easy task, but we have learned much from our successes and failures. If there has been one overarching truth to emerge, perhaps it is that once historical integrity is lost, it cannot be regained.

Moving beyond the traditional realm of historic preservation, which includes buildings, structures, and artifacts, as well as gardens and important landscapes, we find a growing public interest in preserving and commemorating historic trails and routes upon which significant events played themselves out. This article does not address the preservation of historic landscapes associated with old trails, nor does it address associated campsites, archeological sites, structures, or buildings along the trail corridor. Instead, it deals directly with the conservation of the core of any historic route: the trodden "fabric," or remnant track, and specifically along the Santa Fe National Historic Trail.

Stretching between Missouri and New Mexico between 1821 and 1880, the Santa Fe Trail was first an international, and then a national, route of commerce and cultural exchange. Much physical evidence of its existence has been lost over time to agriculture, highway development, urbanization, or (more insidiously) to natural processes. Of the 1,200 miles of designated national historic trail, it is estimated that 200 miles of visible trail remnants remain, mostly in the cattle ranching areas of Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Santa Fe Trail remnants still possess a high degree of cultural resource integrity. Called "ruts," or "swales," depending upon their degree of prominence, trail remnants generally do not appear the same today as they would have during their time of use. Wind and water erosion have deepened them, and airborne and waterborne soil particles have helped fill them in. Native grasses have helped to heal the scars, while channelized spring rains stimulate lush flower blooms within their confines. But although they do not look the way they did after decades of passage by tens of thousands of ox hooves and the 2.5-ton freight wagons they pulled, what does remain is just as important as the weathered ruins of a prehistoric structure or the meticulously preserved facade of an antebellum mansion. The trail itself is not an incidental side effect of transportation or human movement, but actually a worn, dusty landmark meant to be seen and followed with a sense of security and practicality. Seen as a human-made structure (although certainly one that changed and moved as conditions warranted), and the object of official survey during its day, it is appropriate to use the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation* in finding appropriate guidance for balancing preservation and use.

Although Santa Fe Trail remnants repose in soil, with none etched in stone as may sometimes be found on the Oregon Trail, ruts and swales can still be conserved, if not preserved, for future enjoyment and appreciation. On open range land, where most extant ruts are found, meandering cattle have been beneficial in keeping vegetation in check. But stabilization may also call for special methods to keep ruts from eroding further, such as re-vegetation, drainage improvements, or prescribed burning.

Visitor retracement directly on actual trail ruts should only be encouraged if the type of use (for instance, hiking, horseback riding, wagons) and expected levels of use, when considered together with a particular segment's soil, groundcover, and drainage character, are such that the physical character of the ruts will not be adversely altered. We generally try to discourage public use of trail ruts until we have had a chance to assess the particular circumstances in consultation with landowners, soils experts, and others, and arrive at sound conclusions. With much of the Santa Fe Trail remotely located and not expected to attract heavy visitation, in most cases we expect that hiking will not pose a concern, although it is possible

that horses and wagons could under certain conditions.

Where some of the trail has been used continuously over time and has evolved into two-track farm roads, the conservation/use issue ceases to be a concern, because the resource has already been irreversibly altered by the human use of motorized vehicles. If, on the other hand, the type of use and nature of the resources are such that a rut's condition will not lend itself to recurring visitor use without adverse physical impacts, it would be prudent to look at alternatives for public use.

Alternatives could include a parallel recreation trail, provided that this trail did not intrude on the historic scene. One such solution is the USDA Forest Service's creation of a Santa Fe Trail companion trail along 19 miles of the Cimarron National Grassland in southwest Kansas. Concerned about potential impacts to trail ruts and swales from hikers, horseback riders, and wagons, the Forest Service mowed a 12-foot-wide swath roughly 150-feet from the visible ruts, eliminating yucca and woody growth, seeding voids with buffalo grass, placing geo-web material at a few steep drainage crossings and backfilling over it, and creating a non-intrusive recreation trail defined mostly by its lower grass profile. If there develop signs that the modern buffalo grass tread is taking on the character of an historic trail scar, then the trail can be shifted while its former track heals.

For much of the Santa Fe Trail's length, surface evidence of the Trail has disappeared. When that last recorded vestige of the Trail's weathered presence has disappeared, then it is possible to either establish a recreation trail, or, if documentation such as historic descriptions or graphics exists, simulate or re-create the historic appearance. Such efforts need to weigh any possible effects on data available from subsurface archeological values, including those of adjacent campsites, and so forth. Similarly, but at the other extreme, where the trail has become so deeply eroded that it ceases to resemble any notion of what constituted the Trail, then new, contemporary alternatives can be employed. Visitors should be informed that simulations or re-creations are exactly that, to help them understand what they are seeing and experiencing. Where recreation trails are employed, interpretive material should be available to help visitors envision what the trail once appeared like.

We have not (nor have the state historic preservation officers) supported the notion of preserving remaining trail remnants by encouraging unlimited public use in order to perpetuate something visible. But some see the continued presence of the rut as paramount and feel that compacting the soil or baring it prevents the rut's or swale's disappearance. Some may see this as similar to reconstructing or restoring a historic structure though we don't usually know what the original trail segment looked like in its prime. This is analogous to stacking new adobe blocks on a weathered ruin or taking a chisel to a petroglyph so that the essence is not allowed to melt away. For others, maintaining the sense of place, being able to stand in a rut and imagine the wagons passing by, is more important than whether or not the rut is weathered or modified by human intervention.

A new trail superimposed on original, though naturally altered, remnants is at best only a contemporary simulation of what was there, but at the cost of degrading and obscuring the historic remnant's intrinsic values - ones that can make it qualify for the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors on foot, horse, or wagon would likely be ineffective in matching the results of heavy freight wagons and oxen teams. Visitors may walk along the rut and create narrow social trails or walk on the sloped rut shoulder and not the low points. Such activity could actually hasten the disappearance of the rut. With so much of the trail no longer visible, it would be more appropriate to try to recreate or evoke a sense of the trail's presence on those areas where it is known the route passed.

The reality, though, is that too many people hold the remaining trail remnants in awe as weathered and aging touchstones with the past, and some do so to the degree that they do not want to even set foot on them. How would they react if they knew that on another trail visitors were allowed to walk by the thousands on a section that sees such extensive erosion that fill is brought in from another place once a year to raise the tread? What is hallowed ground if the ground is imported? For these people there is a great fascination for naturally altered trail remnants, no matter how subtle, than for those that have been disconnected from the processes of time and the marks of antiquity.

The remnants of the Santa Fe Trail will be around for a long time to come, and with more research into trail morphology, we may learn new ways to conserve them that are consistent with current preservation policy and practice. Trail conservation is going to evolve and catch up with the traditional liturgy because of the increasing national interest in the subject.

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